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NEWS RELEASE

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West Nile Virus Discovered in Gem County Animal

An alpaca in Gem County has tested positive for West Nile virus, the first evidence of the virus in Gem County. An alpaca is a relative of the llama, although somewhat smaller. The alpaca was reportedly euthanized.

In recent weeks, West Nile virus has been discovered in Elmore, Gooding, and Canyon Counties, along with Malheur County in eastern Oregon. “We have experienced quite a bit of activity of West Nile virus in Idaho during the last few weeks, which is evidence that it is now present in a broad area of our state,” says Dr. Christine Hahn, Idaho State Epidemiologist. “People should assume that West Nile virus is present in their communities and take appropriate action to protect themselves and their families from mosquito bites.”

People and animals are infected by West Nile virus through the bite of a mosquito. People cannot contract the virus from casual contact with an infected animal or person. The virus is spread by migrating infected birds, which are bitten by mosquitoes. The infected mosquitoes can then pass the virus on to people and other animals.

Dr. Hahn says that most people infected with West Nile virus will not feel sick or will only have a mild flu-like illness. Common symptoms of infection include headaches, body aches and a mild fever. But the virus can lead to serious illness requiring hospitalization, especially in people over the age of 50.

(more)

People can take the following precautions to protect themselves from mosquito bites:

- Insect-proof your home by repairing or replacing screens;
- Reduce standing water on your property that provides mosquito breeding habitat, such as bird baths and decorative ponds;
- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors;
- Apply insect repellent containing DEET to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children;
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk;
- Report dead birds to your local District Health Department or Fish and Game office.

West Nile infection is extremely virulent with horses and certain species of birds, including crows, magpies, ravens, jays and raptors. There is not a vaccine available for people and most animals, but there is a vaccine approved for horses. Approximately one-third of unvaccinated horses that are infected with West Nile virus die, so horse owners are strongly encouraged to contact their veterinarian for more information on the horse vaccine.

For health information about West Nile virus, please contact your district health department, or visit Health and Welfare's website at: www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov. For information about protecting your horse, contact your local veterinarian, or visit the Department of Agriculture website at www.agri.idaho.gov. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game has helpful West Nile information at: http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/wildlife/manage_issues/wnv/surveillance.cfm

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(Editors: For more information please contact Tom Shanahan at 208-334-0668.)